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AUTHOR Kalmar, Tomas Mario
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ABSTRACT

Testimony offered to the United States Department of Education focuses on the need to legitimize the value of adult biliteracy, particularly among the Hispanic population. Using the demography of Lawrence, Massachusetts as an example, it is suggested that English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction alone will not lower the language barrier within communities, but may actually reinforce it. Latinos want their Spanish literacy to be recognized and valued as much as any English literacy they may attain. Three significant gaps in adult literacy services are identified. These include: (1) basic Spanish reading and writing instruction; (2) numeracy taught in Spanish, and (3) translation and interpretation skills. A need for Spanish-speaking adult educators, to be filled by desegregating the entire adult basic education staffing pattern, is emphasized. The same principles are seen as applicable to all linguistic minorities. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Issues in Hispanic Education: A Public Forum
US Department of Education

Boston, Mass., April 26 1990.

Testimony delivered by
Tomás Mario Kalmar
Biliteracy Specialist
ALRI/SABES
c/o Roxbury Community College
1234 Columbus Ave
Boston, MA
(Tel: 617/424-7947)

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ADULT BILITERACY

The focus I have chosen for my testimony today is the need to legitimize the value of Adult Biliteracy.

This testimony is based on what I have learned in my current position as Biliteracy Specialist at the Adult Literacy Resource Institute, on my experience last year as Director of Adult Education at Alianza Hispana, the oldest and largest Latino social service agency in Massachusetts, and above all on my work in Lawrence as Coordinator of the Lawrence Literacy Coalition.

Lawrence is a city divided by the Language Barrier. In one year alone, two and a half million dollars ($2,500,000) of public funds were dedicated to lowering the Language Barrier by teaching Latino *adults* how to speak English. Two and half million dollars is an enormous amount of money for a city with only sixty thousand (60,000) people. And yet, despite good intentions, the Language Barrier in Lawrence has not been lowered. If anything, it has been fortified, and the tensions in Lawrence are growing every day.

The Language Barrier in towns like Lawrence *can* be lowered, but not by "pumping" public funds into ESL, more ESL, and nothing but ESL. Of course ESL is necessary. But a diet of nothing but ESL is like a diet of white bread.

For one thing, ESL does not change the color of anyone's skin. If you don't like the color of my skin, telling me to study more ESL is not going to solve *your* problem, especially if my command of English is as good as yours.

Half the people in Lawrence are Spanish-speaking Latinos. The majority of asdult Latinos in Lawrence grew up in Puerto Rico, in other islands of the Caribbean, or in Central America.

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None of the adults in Lawrence are prepared to forget what they already know. No Latino adult in Lawrence is prepared to become *illiterate* in Spanish if they already know how to read and write. There are many *literate* Latinos in Lawrence. Lawyers, doctors, clergy. Some ran literacy campaigns in Latin America. Labelling them "illiterate" merely because they don't read and write in English does no one any good.

Latino adults in Lawrence want to improve their literacy skills in both English *and* Spanish. They want to become *bi*-literate. Adult Biliteracy is the true name of the game in a city like Lawrence.

Many of us in this room today, testifying before you, are *bi*-literate. Somos biletrados. We are *twice* as literate as the average mainstream educator. We do not, however, receive twice the respect. We're lucky to get *half* the respect which our less literate monolingual colleagues receive.

The Linguistic Minority Task Force in Lawrence identified three significant gaps in adult lieracy services. The consensus reached by the Task Forces of the Lawrence Literacy Coalition was embodied in the Comprehensive Five Year Literacy Plan delivered to our state Bureau of Adult Education in 1988. A copy of that plan is attached to my written testimony. It is worth highlighting the three significant gaps in service which have been documented for Lawrence because the same gaps are certainly found wherever Linguistic Minority educators have not been permitted to teach Linguistic Minority adults. The three gaps are, briefly:

(1) *Alfabetizacion*
(without which truly illiterate Latino adults cannot take the first step towards literacy in English)

(2) Math in Spanish
(since numeracy is essential in the workplace)

(3) Translation and interpretation skills
(since monolingual English speakers continually conscript bilingual colleagues to translate and interpret for them)

Only someone who speaks Spanish can teach reading, writing and arithmetic in Spanish. Only someone who knows how to translate can teach someone else how to do so. So we need Spanish-speaking adult educators in the class room. But administrators who don't speak Spanish feel ill at ease supervising and evaluating teachers who do. So we need Spanish-speaking Adult Education administrators. But then funding sources feel ill at ease monitoring programs that teach these biliteracy skills. So we need Spanish-speaking professionals in the funding sources.

In short, in order to fill the significant gaps in services identified by Latinos themselves, what you need to do is *desegregate* the entire ABE staffing pattern from top to bottom.

Everything I have said about Spanish-speaking adults applies equally to the many other Linguistic Minority adults who live and work and contribute to the common wealth of Massachusetts.

To sum up my testimony: the Language Barrier that divides Lawrence, and is threatening to divide Massachusetts and the nation as a whole, *can be lowered* if, instead of force-feeding Latino and other Linguistic Minoriuty adults a diet of nothing but ESL under the deceptive label of "adult literacy", you were to *legitimize the value of Adult Biliteracy* by *desegregating adult education with respect to native language.* Because then we will have a Linguistic Minority workforce which is literate, which can handle mathematical calculations, and which can translate accurately from English to minority languages and back again. The entire community would benefit educationally, economically, and politically.

I will be happy to follow up this testimony with as much information as you may require to analyse in detail the issues I have brought to your attention. We sincerely hope that when these forums are over our collective voice will have been heard and that we did not, in fact, waste our breath.

We a. ›unting on you to *act* on our testimony.

Respectully submitted by

Tomas Mario Kalmar
Biliteracy Specialist
ALRI/SABES
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END

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